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## Reviews of recent publications

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## Reviews of recent publications

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### Keywords

Stephanie Anderson, Le Discours Féminin de Marguerite Duras, Julia Lauer-Chéenne, M. Keith Booker, Literature and Domination: Sex Knowledge and Power in Modern Fiction, Frédérique Chevillot, Frédérique Chevillot, La Réouverture du texte, Susan Ireland, Hélène Cixous, Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing, Jeff Schneider, Vincent Descombes, The Barometer of Modern Reason: On the Philosophies of Current Events, André Pierre Colombat, Beth Holmgren, Women's Works in Stalin's Time: On Lidiia Chukovskaia and Nadezhda Mandelstam, Serafima Roll, Jean François Lyotard, Political Writings, Bill Readings, Kevin Paul Geiman, Ronald Bogue, Karen S. McPherson, Incriminations: Guilty Women/Telling Stories, Colette Hall, Daniel C. Melnick, Fullness of Dissonance. Modern Fiction and the Aesthetics of Music, Walter A. Strauss, Linda Hart Scatton, Mikhail Zoshchenko: Evolution of a Writer, Eric Lozowy, Philippe Sollers, Watteau in Venice, T. Douglas Doyle, Cynthia Steele, Politics Gender and the Mexican Novel 1968-1988: Beyond the Pyramid, Jill S. Kuhnheim, Barbara J. Webb, Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction. Alejo Carpentier Wilson Harris Eduard Glissant, Nicasio Urbina

## Book Reviews

Stephanie Anderson. *Le Discours Féminin de Marguerite Duras*. Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 1995. Pp. 189.

Marguerite Duras' personal and professional life affirm her presence in the tradition of women's writing. In fact, her work is frequently cited as the example of feminine writing. However, Duras' stance is problematic, for some of her texts are pornographic, depicting women immersed and degraded in sadomasochistic violence. The relationship between violence and sexuality continues to be hotly debated among feminists, rendering thoughtful discussion of Duras' work all the more challenging. Three of these troubling texts are confronted in Stephanie Anderson's *Le Discours Féminin de Marguerite Duras*, in which she develops a notion of feminine discourse linking "the metamorphosis of perverted desire" in *Moderato cantabile* (1958), *L'Homme assis dans le couloir I* (1962), and *L'Homme assis dans le couloir II* (1980).

Anderson premises her study upon openness and diversity within the feminine sexual experience, stating that contradictions, ambivalence, and dangers as well as pleasures must be taken into account. Her book is divided into two sections: "Poetical Architecture" followed by "Dissonant Voices." The first part examines metaphors of opposition which represent the quest for the subversive through death, eroticism, and violence. Anderson links Duras to the avant-garde, exploring traces and influences of George Bataille. In *Moderato Cantabile* conflicts of excess, disorder, and eroticism centered in the heroine overturn traditional binary oppositions to create a feminine mystery equated with difference, whereas in *L'Homme assis dans le couloir I* oppositional structures lead to an ambivalent ending of nonsense. Anderson continues her examination of metaphoric dualism in *L'Homme assis dans le couloir II*, which, similar to the two previous texts, depicts transcendence through degradation and contains elements of sadomasochism which seem to undermine feminine power.

In the second part of her study, Anderson relies upon Gerald Genette's theories of narratology in order to explore the narrator's presence and significance. *Moderato Cantabile*, the most readerly text among the three, appears to be a series of cinematographic scenes. Anderson's close reading

oscillates between omniscient narrator and external focalization along with narrative shifts from heterodiegetic to homodiegetic to autodiegetic. The female self is doubled, trapped between object and subject.

Like *Moderato Cantabile*, *L'Homme assis dans le couloir I* is mimetic with some diegesis. Unlike the earlier text, the narrative voice in this work offers no clear guide. Anderson devotes less time to her discussion of this enigmatic work, preferring to treat *L'Homme assis II*, a "writerly text," in greater detail. Her analysis takes note of various interpretations and is developed by the following questions: Is the text homodiegetic or heterodiegetic? Is the narrator the heroine or the witness? The role of the feminine narrator constitutes the bulk of Anderson's attention as she traces the movement between mimesis and diegesis, between "I" and "she," as well as the interplay between the masculine and feminine gaze.

Anderson interprets these three works not as masculine representations of perverted eroticism, but as invitations to see and understand more comprehensively. *Le Discours Féminin de Marguerite Duras* is noteworthy in that it contributes to the present debate regarding pornography and feminism by commenting on the role of the gaze, the split between "normal" and deviant sexual behavior, the nature of feminine desire, and the link between act and fantasy.

Julia Lauer-Chéenne

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M. Keith Booker. *Literature and Domination: Sex, Knowledge, and Power in Modern Fiction*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1993. Pp. 192.

M. Keith Booker's *Literature and Domination* will not teach readers specific facts; yet they certainly will learn a great deal in the process of reading this work, as such is the paradox of true literary critical discourse. Booker's study is indeed a generously intelligent and highly informed piece of criticism. What is the big deal about "literature," in general, and what is the big deal about "domination," in particular? asks the author. These are not so simple questions after all, as Booker himself is involved in the dynamics of epistemological domination which he is attempting to address. Nonetheless, literary mastery may be of a different type, as the author believes that "Literature has the potential to explore and illuminate objects of inquiry in a mode of dialogue and performance rather than by seeking to dominate them in the traditional mode of science" (5). This thoroughly reflexive study proposes to reveal, through a well-chosen selection of modern texts, various ways in which literature's special "potential" can yield intellectual fulfillment without imposing interpretive closure.

Each of the six chapters in Booker's study sets out to debunk a specific mode of domination likely to occur in literary representation. Detailed and telling, the chapters' titles deserve to be cited in full. In his first chapter, "This is Not a Pot: The Assault on Scientific Language in Samuel Beckett's *Watt*," Booker outlines the basis of his subsequent argument: no critical discourse will ever dominate the work of art. By its very resistance to epistemological interpretation, Beckett's *Watt* aims to deconstruct the myth of a possible rational discourse inherited from an ill-named era of Enlightenment. In a second chapter entitled "Tradition, Authority, and Subjectivity: Narrative Constitution of the Self in *The Waves*," Booker gives to both male and female readers a very perceptive and gender-concerned account of Woolf's intriguing text. *The Waves*, in a sense at odds with the traditional masculine egotistic drive for domination, dramatizes a narrative selfemerging from a plurality of moods and characters. The third chapter, "Adorno, Althusser, and Humbert Humbert: Nabokov's *Lolita* as Neo-Marxist Critique of Bourgeois Subjectivity," offers a radically new perspective on the now classic text. *Lolita* is not only shown as undermining the very process of interpellation it criticizes (here advertising); it also "provides substantial literary support for the neo-Marxist critique of bourgeois society" (89); it likewise warns against any critical discourses which would attempt to limit the interpretive process to a single locus of contention. Probably more on account of Pynchon's writing than Booker's criticism, "Mastery and Sexual Domination: Imperialism as Rape in Pynchon's *V*" proved to be, at any rate to me, the least appealing chapter of the book. Among other things, the reader is invited to acknowledge that certain "scenes of literal rape add dramatically to the horror of Pynchon's text, and to his suggestions of the relationship between imperialism and a sadistic drive for sexual domination" (93). As true as this may be, I have difficulty appreciating rape as a metaphor used to undermine any sort of political tragedy: rape is not a metaphor but a tragedy in itself. Chapter Five provides a pleasant relief from the one preceding it: "Who's the Boss? Reader, Author, and Text in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*" focuses on "reading as a quest for domination of the text" as Calvino both dramatizes and makes impossible the very act of reading any novel, beginning with his own (18). I find this chapter to be the most convincing of all—in addition to analyzing Calvino's humorous and witty novel, Booker discusses in depth other diverging critical approaches. In his final and resolutely inconclusive chapter, however, Booker goes back to the beginnings of his critical endeavor, as well as to his author of predilection, Beckett. "Against Epistemology in Reading and Teaching: The Failure of Interpretive Mastery in Beckett's *The Lost Ones*" is the coda of a somewhat subdued fugue: the critic re/turned teacher proposes a practical way to seduce a class of undergraduates with the lure of interpretive mastery. Here, the reader learns that Beckett's novel "is an ideal text for the exploration of the process of

seeking mastery and domination through reading and therefore provides a paradigmatic illustration of the concepts discussed in this study" (142).

Keith Booker's *Literature and Domination* is a rich and refreshing piece of criticism. It is definite in content, yet humble in tone. The text presents no jargon that is not readily and adequately accounted for. The author is knowledgeable in his field of research, and quotations and names seem to come to his text in a happily unaffected way. This is a wise and intellectually pleasing book, which in itself bears witness to the fact "that the natural desire for hermeneutic mastery of the text need not lead to a totalizing demand for closure and resolution" (141).

Frédérique Chevillot  
University of Denver

Frédérique Chevillot. *La Réouverture du texte*. Saratoga: Anima Libri, 1993. Pp. 151.

Few book-length studies have been devoted to the topic of narrative opening and closure. Frédérique Chevillot's *La Réouverture du texte* helps remedy that situation. Chevillot's study was inspired by her habit of re-reading the beginning of every novel she finishes, and *La Réouverture du texte* explores this relationship between beginning and end, opening and closure, that Chevillot calls "la dynamique de la réouverture" (2). The title of the book appears to be a response to Umberto Eco's *L'Oeuvre ouverte*, and Chevillot's perceptive analysis is informed by both Eco's notion of the "open" work and the methodology of narratologists such as Gérard Genette and Gerald Prince. Using Genette's distinction between "histoire," "récit," and "narration," she examines what role these three categories play in narrative opening and closure and how they affect the dual process of writing and reading the first and last pages of a text.

The introduction to *La Réouverture du texte* provides a brief but exhaustive chronological overview of studies of opening and closure done over the last thirty years. Whereas most of these analyses define "opening" as the first few sentences or pages of a novel, Chevillot looks at longer segments of text, which she calls "les mouvements d'ouverture et de clôture" (18), and while most of the earlier studies examine the question of closure without any reference to opening, she rejects the concept of closure in favor of "réouverture" or "éternelle ouverture" (14): "Narrative ou textuelle, la notion même de clôture n'est plus viable; elle est inconcevable" (14). The five following chapters illustrate the notion of "réouverture" in an interesting series of close readings of different types of novels by a wide range of authors: Honoré de Balzac, Samuel Beckett, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Raymond Roussel, Louis Aragon, Italo Calvino, Marcel Bénabou, and Anne

In the first chapter, Chevillot takes as her starting point the “myth” of the closed, readerly Balzacian text (15). Her analysis of the Vautrin trilogy demonstrates that, despite their apparently linear progression from beginning to end, the novels are not as closed as they at first seem and that the impression of ending is yet another of Balzac’s “illusions” (138). After questioning the traditional view of closure in the nineteenth-century realist novel, she examines different forms of narrative re-opening in twentieth-century fiction. She begins by comparing Balzac’s trilogy with Beckett’s—*Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, and *L’Innomable*. Her comparison emphasizes that whereas Balzac sets out to tell a story, Beckett narrates the absence of one, and she sees his novels as characterized by “un continuel recommencement,” a series of openings that reflect the narrator’s inability to narrate and to end his story (68). The notion of lack of story provides the link between Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, whose work Chevillot uses to explore a question raised by the *Nouveau Roman*: “peut-il y avoir récit sans qu’il y ait histoire?” (70). In this chapter, her analysis focuses on the proliferation of stories in *La Jalousie* and *Le Miroir qui revient* and the way in which the experimental form affects the opening and closure of the two texts.

Chapter four focuses on intertextual and ludic approaches to opening and closure in a series of metatexts with similar titles: Roussel’s *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres*, Aragon’s *Je n’ai jamais appris à écrire ou les incipit*, Calvino’s *Comment j’ai écrit un de mes livres*, and Bénabou’s *Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres*. These texts were all written by precursors and members of the Oulipo (the “Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle”), who conceive of literature as a form of play, and Chevillot’s analysis examines how their metafictional approach to opening and closure presents their texts as a game between author and reader in which the reader is encouraged to re-consider—to re-open—an earlier text the metatext purports to discuss.

Finally, Chevillot raises the question whether the closing sequence of a novel encourages the reader to read the author’s next work: “Dans quelle mesure ‘finir d’écrire’ un roman consiste-t-il à aménager l’espace nécessaire à sa réouverture et à l’ouverture du suivant?” (115); “Était-il possible de surprendre dans la clôture d’un texte, l’ouverture du suivant?” (5). To answer this question, she examines Anne Hébert’s novels in the order in which they were published. While she finds the opening and closing sequences suggest a certain continuity from one novel to the next—somewhat in the manner of a fugue—she concludes there is no clear evidence to support the hypothesis that the end of one text prefigures the beginning of the next. This last chapter is perhaps the least satisfying. Although Chevillot tells her readers she will not address the question of women’s writing in *La Réouverture du texte*, the two quotations from Cixous she uses to open and close this chapter, both of which refer to “un corps textuel féminin,” sug-



gest nonetheless that she intends to examine forms of re-opening specific to texts written by women, and the chapter would have seemed stronger had she done so (114).

Overall, however, *La Réouverture du texte* provides an insightful introduction to the study of narrative opening and closure. It raises important questions about the relationship between these two poles and highlights the complex and varied forms that opening and closural strategies can take, from illusions of closure and endlessness to loops and self-erasing narratives. It thus contributes to our understanding of how narrative works and how the reader makes sense of a text. While the end of a Hébert text may not prefigure the beginning of the next, *La Réouverture du texte* clearly does, and we can look forward to Chevillot's re-opening this topic in a study of women writers.

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Hélène Cixous. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. Pp. 162.

As part of the famous triumvirate of modern French feminists that also includes Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous has earned her place in the intellectual history of our century by forever altering the manner in which we analyze language, gender, and ourselves. In her newest work, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, she turns to the world of writing to examine the nature of "the strange science of writing."

Unlike her other texts, most notably "The Laugh of the Medusa" and "Sorties," that have dealt almost exclusively with her theory of a specifically feminine writing (*écriture féminine*), Cixous asks us to "leave women aside for today" (115). She offers us instead insights into her writing process so that we may come to understand our own difficult "journeys into writing." She divides the text into three parts: "The School of the Dead," "The School of Dreams," and "The School of Roots." Throughout her discussion she also draws on lessons she learned from the authors who have most influenced her life and work, including Clarice Lispector, Jean Genet, Marina Tsvetaeva, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and above all Franz Kafka.

Cixous introduces us to "The School of the Dead" by exploring connections between death and writing. Focusing on her belief that something or someone must necessarily die in order for good writing to be born, she contends that our lives gain meaning only when we confront our own mortality and begin to desire immortality in words—an immortality that, according to Cixous, can only be a dream. For, just as in reading we rewrite the book and erase the author, in writing we annihilate ourselves by offering our stories up for erasure by the reader. Writing thus becomes an im-



licit submission to the “violence of reading” or a form of intellectual suicide. Interestingly, she argues that because when we read our own writing we come to see ourselves as objects, as other, as foreigners, we can come to know ourselves only through our writing.

In the second section of her study, “The School of Dreams,” Cixous examines the crucial role dreams play in writing. “The book,” she writes, “is the Door—the dream of the other that doesn’t escape us—that dreams us” (58). Dreams have a special power for Cixous because they represent the door to the most foreign of countries that exists inside each of us, the unconscious. She celebrates the unconscious as the place from which her own writing and, indeed, all good writing springs and returns. After all, she maintains that the best texts will transport the reader “towards foreign lands, toward the foreigner in ourselves. Traveling in the unconscious, that inner foreign country, foreign home, country of lost countries” (70).

Traveling to the unconscious leads Cixous to the third and final part of her journey: “The School of Roots.” In this complex and intriguing section, she explores the origins of writing in the “nether realms” of our minds and imaginations. She encourages us to go deep inside ourselves to our roots, that place beyond culture and nature (to her, both are social constructions), and recognize that the force that drives us all to write, whether we are Hélène Cixous, Jean Genet, or ourselves is the same: the need to understand ourselves and our world. She ends by stressing that for her the writing process cannot be separated from the sometimes agonizing journey of living.

*Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* is one of those sublime books so suited for the imagination that it begins to live only after you have turned its last page. Cixous here takes us by the hand and leads us on her own deeply personal journey through her writing life, allowing us to see the forces that most influenced her life and work. In her journey, she is attuned to every possibility of language and allows her thoughts to flow across borders of both time and space to express those possibilities. She thus transforms her text into one of the finest examples of intertextuality that I have ever read. Indeed, she continually engages in dialogues with other texts and other languages (French, German, Spanish, and Portuguese), and more impressively, she practices a reflexive intertextuality by turning her words back upon themselves in an attempt to examine writing and its significance in her own life. When read alongside Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves* and Irigaray’s *Je, Te, Nous*, this text also comes to represent part of a major paradigm shift within the writings of the triumvirate from a preoccupation with *écriture féminine* to an exploration of the “foreigner” in literature and ourselves.

As the most readable, personable, and accessible of her nonfiction works, this text deserves to be read as an introduction to Cixous’s theories. After all, the best means of understanding what she has written is by

first understanding the place from which she writes, for as Cixous tells us, we cannot imagine a journey until we know where it starts.

Jeff Schneider  
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Vincent Descombes. *The Barometer of Modern Reason: On the Philosophies of Current Events*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. Pp. 187.

Descombes' essay analyzes why philosophers feel compelled, and yet fail, to analyze the present as such (l'actualité). At the limit, artists like Baudelaire can create an aesthetic of the present, but an ontology of the present seems doomed to fail. In other words, Descombes develops here the consequences of the necessary distinction he previously characterized in *Modern French Philosophy* between what is "de fait" and what is "de droit." Without this distinction there can be no philosophy but only different kinds of "philosophisms" that ultimately reduce all cultures and all problems to philosophy. Then Descombes proceeds with analyzing several of these failures in the works of Foucault, Habermas, Bataille, and Heidegger.

Vincent Descombes' book opens with the following question: What allows a philosopher, as such, to believe that he must think current events? This problem could reveal a fundamental paradox because current events represent the diversity that exists only here and now, while philosophy has to conjure up meaning, principles, and concepts in a systematic manner. According to the Hegelian philosophy of history, the philosopher has become both an intellectual and a metaphysician. He "aspires to write a speculative system *and* to take part in the formation of public opinion" (16). In this sense, Descombes asserts, in a rather iconoclastic manner, that Foucault was a Hegelian thinker and that his project to turn a history of the present into an ontology of the present characterizes rather well the delusions of post-structuralist thought. An authentic history of the present cannot be "overly concerned with the meaning of the concept 'to be now,' given that such histories are almost exclusively focused on the diversity of what actually is, now" (22).

With this failure of Foucault's Hegelian position and that of post-structuralism, Descombes questions the validity of all philosophies of history. Descombes stresses that the recent anniversary of the French Revolution was the occasion of a return to Kantian philosophy in France, that is to say to a philosophy of judgment replacing the excesses of the dialectic conceptions of history (Hegelian and Marxist). Unfortunately, Descombes notices that for Kant, "the philosopher, as philosopher, has

nothing to say about the 'event' of the French Revolution. As for the 'principles' invoked by the Revolution—that's another story" (30). The philosopher is always removed from the event appearing in front of him or her as a spectacle. Consequently, the political commitment of the philosopher and his or her support to a cause become a moral judgment, whatever the constantly changing actuality of current events. Thus the committed philosopher can be led to support atrocious political systems, by principle. "Though there is surely a morality that is universal, there is no such thing as a universal politics. It is simply not possible for philosophers to announce that 'everything is political' " (40). The goal of the philosophy of current events could then only be to help us correct the conceptual systems that allow us to give meaning, to understand actuality, in different circumstances.

Unfortunately, when Habermas characterizes modern and anti-modern discourses with a Hegelian terminology, he does not situate them in relationship to their historic framework: "he is privileging a particular national tradition" (48). According to Descombes, what is modern can only be understood within the historical and sociological contexts of distinct societies, as Baudelaire demonstrated, and not by regressing to and isolating some singular and universal philosophical principles as Habermas does. By limiting Baudelaire's theory to an aesthetic judgment expressing a Kantian thought, Habermas becomes a philosophist (50). Modern beauty thus plays the role of an autonomous principle of reason searching for success founding its work in itself instead of tradition (51). For Descombes, in agreement with Baudelaire, French classical culture invented the autonomy of art by separating the profane from the sacred (56). For Baudelaire, beauty is also relative to time (63). It is no longer aesthetics but poetics as theory of the human drama that defines the use of the word "beautiful." Here, Baudelaire writes from a sociological point of view, including the "legitimate and mysterious reasons for all customs" that are rejected by Habermas's "generalized academicism" (63-64).

Habermas also criticizes French Nietzscheism or "neostucturalism" (Bataille, Derrida, Foucault) because it paradoxically offers reasons to oppose reason. However, according to Descombes, to consider this point one must first rethink modern French thought in relationship to the failure of the abstract moralism of the French Revolution "to liberate humanity" (68). This necessity to include the Other than reason to think the present represents the fundamental moral and intellectual disarray of French thought (73). This problem was particularly acute in 1938 for the members of the College of Sociology. Descombes then criticizes the insufficiencies of Bataille's theory as it tried to combine the Hegelian teachings of Kojève and Eric Weil with Durkheim's and Mauss's sociology of collective representations. Consequently, Bataille "attempted to assimilate the profane realm of existence to the creation of sectarian communities." Caught in the

Manicheism of reason and violence, Caillois was led to a position that was virtually "nothing short of totalitarian" (91). Only Michel Leiris denounced these dangerous consequences at the time. For Descombes, this catastrophic evolution marks the end of the French crisis of the Enlightenment.

Starting with a critical reading of Heidegger's work, Descombes analyzes next the problem of the presuppositions to the formation of an epochal metaphysics. If any relationship between technic and nature presupposes a metaphysics, the metaphysics of the atomic age is based on the principle of sufficient reason as it was defined by Leibniz. For Heidegger, the very existence of this principle indicates that there is a general ontology for which we must find the reasons of existence. This rise to the extremes, the passage from "there is" to "we must," characterizes the passage from the question of existence to the question of being in Heidegger's work. Against Heidegger's disciples who limit the principle of reason to a "generalized calculability" (109), Descombes operates a return to Leibniz in order to praise the advantages of "the divine mathematics" of the *harmonia mundi* (111). In this manner, the problem of being joins the problem of agreement and tuning to existence. In the end, for Descombes, "the various Western metaphysics 'grew out of' Western culture" and not the opposite (121). Consequently, "the very notion of a 'metaphysics of the age' is incoherent" (124). Moreover, Descombes cannot express any final point of view on the "Heidegger Affair" as "Heidegger seems [to Descombes] to have never made a philosophical judgment that *also* bore on the events of his time" (124). From that point on, Descombes revindicates, analyzes, and searches for a true autonomy for philosophy based on the necessary distinction between what is *de facto* and what is *de jure*. In this manner, metaphysics cannot be reduced to an ideology and Descombes can develop his apology for philosophy itself.

For the modern philosopher, myths and beliefs have given ground to reason. However, after the "disenchancing" of the world, modernization characterizes as much the modern and the postmodern within the dialectic of rationality and absurdity. The analysis of these two concepts is developed in the last two chapters of the book. With Wittgenstein, Descombes shows how the "disenchancing" elaborates a mythology of reason that cancels out bad luck and promises salvation. The fundamental error according to Descombes is to "believe" in the dialectic of the myth and reason. The myth would be nothing but another register of human reasoning. Based on his reading of Louis Dumont, Descombes differentiates between a "clear" rationality that distinguishes and a "thick" rationality that perceives all the registers of human reasoning, rejecting at the same time the myth of the Other than reason. Within this framework, Descombes' last chapter tries to characterize the project of the autonomy of reason within a given culture. In this domain, his references are the works of Dumont, Castoriadis, and Wittgenstein.

Descombes' book is well served by Stephen Schwartz's very good translation. In spite of this, the succession of the chapters lacks transition and it is difficult to follow Descombes' argument between each point he makes. Consequently, this excellent essay often fascinates by its minute argumentation, sometimes at the expense of its general demonstration.

André Pierre Colombat  
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Beth Holmgren. *Women's Works in Stalin's Time: On Lidiia Chukovskaia and Nadezhda Mandelstam*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993. Pp. 225.

This eloquently written book re-examines the literary history of the Stalinist era by providing a fresh insight into the life and writings of those who, by the strength of their devotion and their commitment to the Russian cultural tradition, resisted the official doctrine of Soviet ideology and preserved the creative impulse. The fresh touch of this study lies not so much in its re-examination of the unofficial Russian culture under Stalin, but in its completely new focus. As compared with the general investigation of the era, Professor Holmgren looks at the roles that female companions, daughters, and wives, played in preserving the literary heritage by re-inscribing the heroic lives of their beloved companions in their own memoirs. While briefly alluding to an array of prominent female figures of the era—Elena Bulgakova, Olga Ivinskaia, Evgeniia Ginzburg, Mariia Ioffe, and others—she eventually focuses on two women—the daughter of Kornei Chukovskii, Lidiia Chukovskaia, and Osip Mandelstam's wife, Nadezhda Mandelstam. This task proves to be very interesting, for it raises a set of currently often-discussed questions about the unjustly diminished role ascribed to women in shaping our history, or about the simple exclusion of women's writing from the accepted literary canon which we eventually perceive as the only available document regarding our cultural past. By focusing her intention on the life and writing of Lidiia Chukovskaia and Nadezhda Mandelstam, Professor Holmgren "corrects" historical injustice by shifting the often marginal issues in our literary past to the center of the reader's attention. At the same time, by analyzing the role that Mandelstam's and Chukovskaia's writings played in shaping Russian culture, she indirectly raises the question of the necessity to re-evaluate our traditional concept of the literary canon. Yet her study is not a feminist panegyric to the downtrodden and socially abused in history. This book demonstrates an acute cultural awareness of the period. It investigates Mandelstam's and Chukovskaia's writings in the context of both the political and social situ-

ation, and what is most important, in the context of the extreme lack of women's awareness of their own identities in the former Soviet Union.

Professor Holmgren starts by looking at the role that the domestic environment played in the time of Stalin's rule for becoming a "locus for the unofficial, alternative and even oppositional" culture (26). She convincingly argues that due to the fact that the "domestic sphere under Stalin benefitted from the political neglect," the role of women as traditional caretakers and hearth-keepers extended to embrace the realm of political dissent and unofficial opposition (10). The traditional image ascribed by Russian men to their female companions as self-sacrificing martyrs, nurturing and compassionate mourners, or—under more peaceful circumstances—persons with moral fervor and limitless devotion to family matters kindled Chukovskaia's and Mandelstam's desire for writing about the ones who were unjustly persecuted, sentenced to prison camps, or murdered during Stalin's purges. Their initial stimulus for writing memoirs—also quite a traditional genre in Russian literature for defending political freedom, human rights, and enlightened ideas—was shaped by their political fervor and their allegiance to the memory of their beloved ones rather than their desire to reinscribe their own experiences of the harsh years of Stalin's dictatorship. Thus, their writings in many ways reflect a culturally imposed role for women of preserving culture rather than creating it, and hence their voices are often diffused within the texts of the beloved ones that they want to preserve for posterity. The devotional mission that these women took upon themselves eventually had to be balanced with the creative drive that lies behind any process of writing, and it is the latter, according to Professor Holmgren, that differentiates Chukovskaia's works from Mandelstam's writing. Chukovskaia's memoirs and fiction "never overtly challenged the culturally and paternally sanctioned model of a 'poetically educated' woman (an enlightened female *intelligent*)" but remained within the rigidly defined gender role for women as gatekeepers of the man-created culture (172). She never went beyond the traditional modes of man-centered patterns of discourse which would present the idealized picture of their beloved friends as social stereotypes of martyrs and national heroes. Mandelstam's memoirs, on the other hand, challenged this devotional stance of writing by violating the taboos of hagiographic discourse. Her probing into the intimate and "profane" subject matters and her refusal to canonize the literary elite, including such female "archdeaconesses" of the Russian avant-garde as Anna Akhmatova, as well as her positive reassessment of the "weak" and "meek" persons, who in fact helped to shape culture behind the stage of official literary production (that had to conform to the rigid patters of Socialist realism), eventually helped her to transgress the role of a "meek" gatekeeper of cultural dissent. Hence, Professor Holmgren suggests that it is by challenging the official patterns of traditional writing that Mandelstam managed not only to deviate from the tra-



ditional role of the poet's dutiful wife and the socially imposed role of self-sacrificing female, but also to carve her own independent place within both Russian culture and women's writing. The peaceful boldness of her descriptions approximated only the flamboyant tendency of "contrariness" practiced by her contemporary, and the most challenging woman poet of the Russian avant-garde, Marina Tsvetaeva. While her example served as a voice of cultural opposition in the post-Stalin era, it undoubtedly stimulated other women to define their own cultural identities outside the prescribed gender roles. The scope and the strength of Mandelstam's influence on other women's writing in the post-Stalinist period and in the time of Perestroika is raised in the concluding chapter of this book. Professor Holmgren's work, written in a sumptuous and eloquent style, undoubtedly stands as a challenging example for re-assessing the role of women in our cultural history and our traditional literary canon at large.

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Jean-François Lyotard. *Political Writings*. Translated by Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. Pp. 352.

What, one might ask, would count as Lyotard's "political writings"? In a sense, virtually everything—but we already have a *Lyotard Reader*. Certainly, one would expect to find Lyotard's *Socialisme ou Barbarie* essays from the 1950s and early 1960s, and indeed, the second half of this collection consists of eleven chapters of *La Guerre des Algériens*, a 1989 reprint of Lyotard's commentaries on the Algerian War written between 1956 and 1963. Perhaps, also, one would not be surprised to see included here (Sections 1-7) *Le Tombeau de l'intellectuel* (1984), an important set of essays occasioned in part by the Socialist victory in France. But as for the rest, the principle of selection seems less one of thematic centrality than of relative inaccessibility, and most of the volume's contents are made up of short writings Lyotard has yet to reprint in books under his own name. (Look elsewhere for excerpts from the very political *Economie libidinale*, *Rudiments païens*, or *Le Differend*, for example.) And yet, much that is included in *Political Writings* is well worth reprinting, and when taken as a whole, the volume does give one a clear sense of the range and seriousness of Lyotard's political thought.

Lyotard is no friend of "grand narratives," and in his thoughtful and illuminating foreword, Bill Readings firmly refuses to offer any biographical framework that might link these writings, organizing them instead according to thematic categories. By providing a representative sampling of Lyotard's writings between 1948 and 1990, however, Readings and Geiman



have given readers sufficient materials to construct biographical narratives of their own. Those familiar with Lyotard's work will find clear traces here of at least one "small narrative" of some importance in the development of Lyotard's political thought—that of his disenchantment with orthodox Marxism and his search for an adequate response to the protean and inexorable development of capitalism. In the context of this narrative that politics of incommensurability may best be understood.

Lyotard is a master of the laconic mini-essay, as the selections of the first section make plain. Titled "Intellectuals," this section indeed provides a useful introduction to Lyotard's notion of the intellectual, not as spokesperson for humanity, but as "witness to differends," or disputes between parties who frame their differences in mutually incompatible idioms (10). But perhaps most important in this section are those essays that develop Lyotard's concept of postmodern capitalism as a metaphysical figure of the infinite will. "A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question" (1982) especially offers a succinct and penetrating analysis of capitalism's drive for a universal exchange of information according to principles of maximum efficiency and functionality, resistance to such cybernetic leveling coming from intellectuals who insist on the incommensurability of various language games and the impossibility of translating differences without erasing them.

Section Two, "Students," focuses on university politics and the events surrounding May 1968. The occasional nature of many of these essays at times limits their appeal, but it is instructive to see Lyotard maintaining throughout a series of polemically charged situations a consistent commitment to the aporias of thought and the necessary uncertainties of genuine teaching. Noteworthy as well in this section is "March 23," an "unpublished introduction to an unfinished book" on May 1968, which furnishes a particularly lucid account of the "capitalist-bureaucratic system" as a regulatory structure that "allows the introduction, the circulation, and the elimination of ever greater quantities of energy" (63-64), and of political resistance as "a dimension of *force* . . . that at times shakes the capitalist system and produces events in it that are initially *unexchangeable*" (64).

Sections Three and Four, "Big Brothers" and "More 'jews,'" contain some of the finest pieces in the volume. Especially compelling are "*Oikos*" (1988) and "The Wall, the Gulf, and the Sun: A Fable" (1990), in which Lyotard subsumes his account of the infinite expansion of the capitalist will within a larger tale of intelligent life's evolutionary preparation for migration to other planets. Capitalism, in this perspective, is but one phase in the development of open cybernetic systems which, with the imminent explosion of the sun in four and a half billion years, must eventually be able to emigrate to a more hospitable environment. Whether the emigrating life-form is human remains to be seen, but Lyotard's concern is that, whatever

its form, it be an open system, one that is sufficiently responsive to the incommensurable. The ideal of capitalist efficiency finds its fulfillment in artificial intelligence, but such non-organic life forms may not be open enough, since computers are not born, are not gendered, and do not suffer the inadequacies and dependencies of childhood. In "The Grip (*Mainmise*)" (1990) and "Europe, the Jews, and the Book" (1990), Lyotard expands on the importance of this lack of autonomy, which not only promotes openness and creativity, but also enforces an ethical responsibility to the other. Lyotard argues here (as he does in his exceptional *Heidegger and "the jews"* [1988]) that this insistence on heteronomy and obligation to the other, so important in Judaism, is what the infinite capitalist will find most intolerable, and what ultimately fuels the implacable and enduring anti-Semitism of the West.

The final section, "Algerians," is the longest of the volume, and for most readers, I suspect, it will be the least interesting of the five. Perhaps historians of the Algerian War will benefit from 155 pages of contemporary annual reviews of the complexities of Franco-Algerian relations between 1956 and 1963. And no doubt biographers of Lyotard will profitably sift through these generally orthodox Marxist analyses for emerging signs of Lyotard's mature thought. But those drawn to this volume through familiarity with Lyotard's other works will discover little in this section to hold their attention long.

Still, half a book is better than no book at all, and the better half of this book is very fine indeed. Lyotard's is one of the most significant voices in contemporary philosophy, and we are fortunate to have available in such reliable and graceful translations these signal contributions to political thought.

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Karen S. McPherson. *Incriminations: Guilty Women/Telling Stories*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. Pp. 215.

This book articulates the relationship between the three terms of the title which are at the center of Karen McPherson's investigation. The interconnectedness between those terms is not, however, straightforward because of the polysemy of the words involved. Therefore, the author plays with their multiple meanings and addresses such questions as: Are we talking of women being incriminated against or are they incriminating themselves? Is either incrimination a proof of guilt? Of what crimes are these women guilty? Are they guilty of "lying (telling stories), or just of speaking for themselves (telling their own stories)?" (4).

The result is an ambitious book whose strength lies in a subtle, intricate, and close reading of five twentieth-century novels: *L'invitée* by Simone

de Beauvoir, *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* by Marguerite Duras, *Kamouraska* by Anne Hébert, *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, and *Le désert mauve* by Nicole Brossard. McPherson concentrates mostly on the first four texts, which she reads for what she calls “the guilty women telling” script in which “narration, transgression and gender are interrelated” (10). *Le désert mauve* is used as a post-script to suggest what the “guilty women script might be when . . . written from another place—and by a different generation of women” (14). This script, McPherson further contends, is “being recognized and inscribed as a kind of intertext in many novels by twentieth-century women writers” revealing the guilt (crime?) still attached to women who dare to write (10).

Each chapter follows an investigative pattern which attempts to 1) locate inscriptions of “a formal or substantive structure of authorities”; 2) identify “criminal circumstances” and “the pattern and logic of incrimination”; and 3) find “the articulation of a woman’s voice that is telling” (13).

The first and longest chapter, “The Voice of Reason,” is devoted to *L’invitée*. It is a good example of McPherson’s insightful reading. This text she finds “the most (deceptively) accessible and the most frustrating of the four texts” (14). Not surprisingly, in view of the current scholarship on Beauvoir, it is also the text that is the least subversive, despite the main female protagonist’s declaration at the end of the novel that “She had chosen herself.” McPherson shows that the real crime is not the killing of Xavière, but the guilt that Françoise feels about her betrayal of Xavière. As the “Other Woman,” Xavière becomes a reflection of Françoise’s criminal self. “X-ing Xavière is not the crime; it is the only way to wipe out the crime” (50). What is at stake in this text is Françoise’s inability to accept her own irrational parts. Fruitfully reading Beauvoir’s fiction alongside her autobiography, McPherson brings to light Beauvoir’s obsessive preoccupation with the fear of losing control and her game of hide and seek with the “truth.” McPherson sees the ending of *L’invitée*, and indeed the whole novel, as a highly “policed” text in which both Françoise and Beauvoir refuse to face the full significance of their acts. Of particular interest is her analysis of Françoise’s blindness to the power that Pierre wielded in her life and will continue to wield despite her claims to have come to her own self through her crime. If, as the critic contends, Pierre (modeled after Sartre) is one of the inscriptions of the law in the novel, Beauvoir is the other one, and “the most vigilant of all” (64), for “in her attempt to shield Sartre from scrutiny, [she] granted Pierre total immunity” (62). Ultimately *L’invitée* is “a novel resisting its own criminal passions and its own crime story” (65). McPherson concludes that “just as the crime in the novel was to wipe out crime, the novel itself may be an attempt to expunge the very crime it represents (that of a woman writing)” (65).

The next three novels portray less duplicitous, but no less complex female characters. Though these novels use different narrative forms, in each of them, the female protagonist, as McPherson convincingly demonstrates, struggles for or challenges narrative authority. In contrast to *L'invitée*, *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* presents a radically elusive female subject as well as a narrative that defies containment. In the end, though crime and desire circulate freely in the novel, McPherson argues that no crime can be pinned on Lol and the novel "deftly subverts any suggestion of Lol's (or, by extension, woman's) guilt" (85).

In *Kamouraska*, the only novel centered around a real crime, Elizabeth denies her criminal responsibility for the death of her husband through a series of conflicting interpretations and memories. McPherson suggests that we read it as "a struggle for narrative control that is at the same time a struggle for the authority to produce or prevent a definitive reading of the crime" (117).

Though written a whole generation earlier, McPherson has kept *Mrs. Dalloway* for the end as she considers it the most subversive text of the four. By daring to speak madness, Virginia Woolf and her characters venture "beyond the confines of conventional discourse" and put into question the laws and customs that rule women's and men's lives (14).

The four novels examined all resist, in varying degrees, the "guilty women telling" script. Yet, argues McPherson, they are still caught in "the vicious circularity that incriminates women telling" (158). It is in *Le désert mauve* that McPherson finds an alternative to this deadlock. Through a perceptive analysis of Brossard's various narrative devices, McPherson suggests that the novel raises the possibility of shifting the blame off the victim (the woman). Brossard wrote what McPherson calls "a feminist post(modern) script in which the text itself is 'a transgression *in* narrative *of* narrative'" (167).

McPherson's multifaceted book shows the ability of women to survive. Her text blends literary analysis with social, philosophical, and political inquiries about the situation of women and women writers in our times. My only quibble is that she often tries to do too much at the same time and her study occasionally overwhelms with the richness of its material. This could be considered "un défaut de ses qualités," which insures that as readers we will find new and provocative ideas with each subsequent reading.

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Daniel C. Melnick. *Fullness of Dissonance. Modern Fiction and the Aesthetics of Music*. London and Toronto: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 1994. Pp. 159.

Studies examining the relation of music and literature are relatively rare, whereas the fine arts and literature have fared better. The reason for this situation lies in the fact that we can use roughly the same critical vocabulary (and at least analogous criteria) for talking about the plastic arts, whereas our vocabulary for talking about music is pitifully inadequate. Is this due to the fact that our culture is predominantly a *visual* culture? Or is it because music is a language complete in itself—grammatically, syntactically—and free from that area of discourse and disagreement known as semantics? Yet a plastic artist would be perfectly justified in claiming the same right of eminent domain for painting, sculpture, and architecture. The problem remains intriguing—and tantalizing; but the fact remains that it is tempting to fabricate a philosophy or sociology of music (Ernst Bloch, T. W. Adorno) rather than to juxtapose music and literature.

Professor Melnick has taken up the challenge of bridging the gap by focusing on the music and literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in terms of the development of dissonance as it evolved from the gradual dissolution of tonality and the resultant chromaticism into the dissonances generated in the twentieth century (Schoenberg, in particular). The philosophical background is provided by Schopenhauer and particularly by Nietzsche; the novelists examined are Proust, Mann, and Joyce.

The title of the study, *Fullness of Dissonance*, raises some questions. Obviously, there is an intentional ambiguity in it, especially when applied to huge works of fiction. Is it the fact of their bulk that confers “fullness” upon them? Do works of music possess an analogous fullness of dissonance—let’s say Mahler’s Ninth? Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* or *Pierrot lunaire*? Berg’s *Lulu* or his Violin Concerto? Stravinsky’s *Sacre du printemps*? Bartók’s Fifth Quartet? Would we be tempted to speak of “fullness” in the case of Webern’s later works? The underlying problem here is the following: to what extent can we take concepts that are germane to one art and transpose them to another? Only approximately, metaphorically—the way we speak of musical “impressionism” (Debussy, Ravel, Delius) or “expressionism” (Berg, Schoenberg, early Bartók, early Hindemith). We need greater precision in our dialogue on the interrelationship of the arts.

Still, Melnick takes hold of his discordant and recalcitrant subject courageously. His principal ally, in this instance, is Nietzsche. Melnick

In this study, I trace the insights *for writers* that emerge from the nineteenth-century tradition of thought about music, which culminates in the idea of dissonance Nietzsche formulates, modern composers utilize, and modern novelists adapt in order to charge and activate their extraordinary imaginative projects.

Schopenhauer, Mallarmé, Pater in England, Wagner, and Nietzsche above all, present conceptions of music which profoundly influenced modern novelists. The impetus to use the musical metaphor stems . . . from Romanticism, and it leads finally to the great musicalized structures of modern fiction, yet that development met with tortuous and revealing difficulties throughout the nineteenth century. (30)

But Nietzsche is less concerned with the purely technical (i.e. conventional) terms of consonance and dissonance (despite his remark in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which Melnick quotes, about “the wonderful significance of *musical dissonance*”) than he is with the origin and the spirit of music. The tension between Dionysos and Apollo remains central to his thinking, with Dionysos perceived always as anterior and more profound than Apollo. “[T]he origin of music lies beyond all individuation, and after our discussion of the Dionysian this principle is self-evident,” the Apollonian having been defined by Nietzsche as the *principium individuationis*. This passage is taken from a little-known essay entitled “On Music and Words,” probably written shortly after *The Birth of Tragedy* and which in many respects can be viewed as prophetic with respect to the modern problem of the relationship of music and text (reprinted in Walter Kaufmann’s translation as an appendix to Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, University of California P, 1989 [111]). The essay focuses on the gestural language of music—not on “feelings”—and even projects a music of silence: insights that have more to do with Mallarmé and Celan, or with Kafka and Beckett, than with the novelists highlighted in Melnick’s study. Perhaps the “full” emptiness of dissonance is found in these authors, and particularly in poetry? How does this take us to Schoenberg, the “emancipator of dissonance,” whom Melnick brackets with Nietzsche? (Yet . . . as the act of imagining can negate the processes of consciousness, Schoenberg’s music offers a paradigmatic model for dissonant narrative which conveys within that negation a liberating attitude toward consciousness [58]).

We all know that notions of dissonance are relative to historical periods and differ vastly throughout the parts of the globe. Charles Rosen states succinctly (and perhaps at first glance shockingly) that the “primary means of musical expression is dissonance” (*Arnold Schoenberg*, Viking Press, 1975 [23]). He points out that dissonance is not necessarily disagreeable noise, as the term is commonly used, nor is it a question of



two or more notes being in disharmony. Rather, a "dissonance is any musical sound that must be resolved, i.e. followed by a consonance: a consonance is a musical sound that needs no resolution, that can act as the final note, that rounds off a cadence" (24).

Melnick's discussion of Schoenberg is inadequate, in view of the "emancipation" achieved by him. The question here turns upon the truly dissonant phase of his atonalism (1907-23), in which "consonance" is in fact impossible, as contrasted with the serial (twelve-tone) period (1924-51), in which "dissonance" is no longer a meaningful concept. Melnick discusses only the final movement of the Second Quartet, op. 10, and mentions in passing the Three Piano Pieces, op. 11. But he leaves aside absolutely crucial works, such as the monodrama *Erwartung*, op. 17 and the epoch-making *Pierrot lunaire*, op. 21. Of the twelve-tone works only the incomplete opera *Moses und Aron* (1932) and the String Trio, op. 45, are cursorily mentioned.

This points up the weakness of Melnick's handling of his important topic and explains the frustrations of the reader. The study is simply too brief, almost to the point of being sketchy. The three novelists chosen require a much fuller analysis in terms of musical-literary "dissonant" elements. The most satisfactory chapter is that on Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, in which the Nietzschean-Schoenbergian worlds intersect in the figure of the composer Leverkühn. But just as Leverkühn's aspirations as a demonic composer owe too much to T.W. Adorno's mentorship of Mann, so the presence of Adorno is too dominant in Melnick's study. Adorno, with his cheerlessly dogmatic partisanship for the Second Viennese School, effectively prevents Melnick from giving due consideration to dissonant composers like Bartók, Ives, and Varèse, and—most pertinently—Stravinsky's compositions during the years 1910-20. There may be a genuine "fullness of dissonance" in *Le Sacre du printemps*, a point of intersection where the Nietzschean (German/Greek) Dionysus meets a (French/Russian) Apollo, and where both of them converge with a new kind of exuberance. This is another method of emancipating dissonance, which Adorno refuses to countenance for dialectical and ideological reasons. There are, after all, more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in Adorno's philosophy, and there may be more than one kind of musical "utopia."

A few minor matters: The reference to Baudelaire on page 41 is incorrect; it should be *Tannhäuser*, not *Tristan*. If Joyce is discussed, then why not spend some time and energy dealing with *Finnegans Wake*, at least in the context of "dissonant" fiction? The reference to three of Kafka's stories is not particularly helpful in a discussion of dissonance. Kafka *ought* to have been discussed, but at length. (In Kafka every apparent consonance is a dissonance which can't be resolved.) Finally, the syllabification of Nietzsche is so consistently bungled by the typesetter that it offends the eye after a while (or the nose, one wants to sneeze).



The topic of *Fullness of Dissonance* is pertinent and timely; most of it is well executed, but the book should have been double its length.

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Linda Hart Scatton. *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Evolution of a Writer*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. Pp. 296.

Mikhail Zoshchenko is known almost exclusively as the writer of humorous and satiric short stories that brought him fame in the 1920s. However, in following decades he also wrote longer and more serious works such as *Youth Restored*, *Before Sunrise*, and *A Skyblue Book*. This portion of Zoshchenko's *oeuvre* has often been neglected or simply ignored by critics and literary scholars. These works are felt to be inferior, less successfully realized, but also "atypical," because they differ greatly in form and tone from the earlier short stories. This exclusion seems unjustified to Linda Hart Scatton. Her book, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Evolution of a Writer*, is mostly devoted to the more obscure dimensions of the writer's literary career. As she remarks, "Few critics have been willing to offer analysis or thoughtful assessment of the longer, more problematic works, and even fewer have tried to place these works within the context of Zoshchenko's writings as a whole" (6). Her study finally fills this gap.

Scatton's book has a unique quality which is becoming rare in contemporary criticism: it is based on a thorough knowledge of documents and empirical facts. Therefore, it transmits to the reader precious information on Zoshchenko and on the social context in which he lived and created. Scatton analyzes carefully the structure and style of each individual work, and at the same time devotes much attention to the text's critical reception, which, in the Soviet Union, often took the form of a lynching or a witch hunt. If specialists of Russian literature will appreciate the discovery of an "other" Zoshchenko that has been excluded from anthologies and textbooks, all readers will find this encounter enriching from another perspective. While describing the evolution of Zoshchenko's career, his constant search for new forms, his experiments in style and narrative devices, his "deviations from well-trod literary paths," Scatton once again tells the fascinating tale of the writer's combat against the primitive and vulgar mentality of the Soviet literary establishment.

I would like, however, to express some reservations concerning the main idea that underlies the author's investigation. Scatton feels that it is important that the longer works "be viewed against the background of the short stories and *feuilletons*" that made Zoshchenko so popular, in order to

prove that his "writing was not in the least contradictory and that it evolved in a most natural and consistent fashion" (54). I fail to understand why it is so important to eliminate all contradictions and tensions in the evolution of Zoshchenko's writing. If the collected works of an artist cannot be considered as an organic whole, does it make them weaker, less interesting? If the longer works are valuable in themselves, is it necessary to argue that they must be treated as "natural outgrowths" of the earlier short stories? Scatton establishes various links between the two periods: first of all, in works such as *Youth Restored* and *A Skyblue Book*, Zoshchenko retained the "simple syntax, straightforward delivery and short, choppy sentence structure" that he used in the 1920s, and did not abandon the first-person narration (*skaz*) which was "a favored and recurrent medium for him" (246); next, Zoshchenko pursued the continuous experiments in language, style, genre, and narrative devices that characterized the earlier texts; finally, on the level of "content," he retained "a consistent focus on the individual, on his or her attempt to come to terms with self and surroundings, using the mental and material means available" (254). This latest element seems crucial to Scatton. She defines Zoshchenko's prose as a "didactic medium," and argues that "For him, writing and teaching had been one from the very beginning. Through [all his works], the goal remained the same: 'to bring his contemporaries to their senses, to help them become more human.' And he included himself among them" (258).

My major objection to Scatton's thesis is that she disregards one fundamental difference between the two periods: the gradual toning down, and eventually total effacement, of humor, whether in the form of satire, parody, or irony. Zoshchenko's contemporaries never followed him in his search for new forms, because they remained indifferent to the tonality and intention of the more serious works. Zoshchenko was appreciated by readers as a hilarious and subversive humorist, and once he abandoned humor, he was himself abandoned by the public. Scatton argues that the humor of the earlier period "had been only the medium," and that "the message remained the same": "By means of the short stories and *feuilletons*, Zoshchenko made people laugh at themselves and hoped that the laughter would promote changes in their attitudes and behavior. Later, he preferred the means of straight example, a prescription for self-improvement which readers might at least consider trying for themselves" (256). Zoshchenko might have been "a moralist by nature," but should we blame his "uneducated readers" for being oblivious to the didactic element in his prose and "neighing like horses?" And should we treat humor as a "simple medium" that was used by Zoshchenko to transmit to his readers an edifying message? I tend to believe that humor is in itself a moral stand, a moral stand which is incompatible with any type of didacticism or moralism.

In conclusion, regardless of my objections to the general orientation of Scatton's thesis, I still feel that her book offers us a unique learning experi-

ence by broadening our perception of Zoshchenko's creative activity. It might be considered as the first serious study on Zoshchenko to appear in English.

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Philippe Sollers. *Watteau in Venice*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994. Pp. 240.

What do authors do when they find the literature of their time "of no use whatsoever?" If that author is the French writer/critic Philippe Sollers, the answer is simple: re-invent literature. Such is the philosophy which underlies *Watteau in Venice*, a text as innovative and controversial as were the paintings of Antoine Watteau in the first decades of the eighteenth century.

Whether one reads this text to indulge an interest in art or literature (as indeed it will appeal to lovers of both), most will concur that *Watteau in Venice* is a composition unlike anything they have seen before. Those who seek an engrossing plot, for example, will be disappointed, for as the author himself explains, "The eminent reader-critic . . . has no wish to know the world of today, is happy with clichés lifted from vague detective novels produced by the entertainment industry in charge of amusing their ignorance. . . ." What little plot this novel does have revolves around a black market art dealer, Pierre Froissart, a.k.a. Watteau, who is conducting a clandestine art sale in Venice. In between dealings, he and his beautiful American college astrophysicist mistress reflect upon the degeneration of contemporary techno-commodity-culture and find solace among the philosophical musings of a host of painters and poets about whom our salesman demonstrates almost encyclopedic knowledge. In fact, some of the novel's most moving and entertaining passages are purloined directly from the letters and journals of an eclectic catalogue of artistic visionaries from Mrs. Monet to Mr. Stendhal.

What this novel lacks in cohesiveness, however, it more than compensates for in complexity. Because this text tries hard to link the art of writing with that of painting, it assumes an impressionistic quality which will challenge the sensibilities of casual readers. Its teasing narrative twists and turns in a prose labyrinth as playful and unpredictable as the avenues of that European city which shares its name. Speakers and tones of voice change abruptly, as do the meanings of words (and even names, e.g. Watteau), which Sollers' word play ultimately forces us to question. And, happily, this English translation (by Alberto Manguel) preserves much of the playful parlance present in Sollers' 1991 original.

Sollers extends the metaphor of writing as painting more explicitly with his many references to framing (both literally and figuratively) and plays with this notion in his discussions of what exists beyond the frame. He reflects that there is light outside our frame of vision. Do characters have a life outside a scene in painting? Outside the pages of a book? Do we have a life outside of what we know as life? Alas, Sollers' cleverness sometimes leads us nowhere but to the Land of the Lost, but more often this author's painterly prose forces us to look closely, to read closely, and at its best, to think critically.

For example, Froissart's characteristically cynical consideration of the Sistine Chapel's renovation begs a reassessment on our part: "We, Insurance Company H., chain of department stores W., offer you, united spectators, works of art constantly renovated, finally revealed in their restored authenticity. Here they are, sparkling, barely sprung forth from the mind and joints of the painter. How lovely, just like TV!" And again "What's that? You say in a whisper that Adam and Eve, banished from the Earthly Paradise, look, after the restoration, like panic-stricken tourists escaping a forest fire or like refugees demanding a bottle of Pepsi at once? Well, maybe. So be it. And then what? Does the Bible forbid publicity?"

But in spite of its good-humored perceptiveness, this is not a novel for the lighthearted, and those who seek the unruffled ease furnished by many of today's "formula novels" would do well to look elsewhere. Sollers' artfully written novel is literature for those who love to read—and read aggressively. His text is highly informed by premodern, modern, and postmodern theory, which is not surprising considering the author's position as editor of the French avant-garde journal *L'Infini* and his marriage to the influential theorist/critic Julia Kristeva. And, as a postmodern novel, we should be alert to its attempts to deconstruct itself. Thus, the careful reader will take pleasure in *Watteau's* many references to its own creation and the narrator's theory of his own text's significance. He questions, for example, whether his text will be fully appreciated within the frame of today's readership or whether, like the works of so many artists, his creations will be valued only by those of a later generation.

To be sure, *Watteau in Venice* indulges in the sort of egotistical fantasies for which artists such as Picasso and Warhol have become notorious, but this is not to say that this novel lacks a profound significance for a wider audience. Quite the contrary. Indeed, for all this text's haughty mannerism, the questions it raises are as pertinent today as they were for the first painters of the caves at Lascaux.

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Cynthia Steele. *Politics, Gender, and the Mexican Novel, 1968-1988: Beyond the Pyramid*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1992. Pp. 209.

A pyramid is the central metaphor in Cynthia Steele's book, *Politics, Gender, and the Mexican Novel, 1968-1988*, and she uses it to evoke a specific place, history, social structure, and the idea of contradictions essential to her study of the interaction of politics and narrative in Mexico. The pyramid is emblematic of the hierarchical structure of power relations in Mexican society, defined by gender as well as race and class. It is also important as an actual structure, for it is an image that unites both real and symbolic realms; it is an ancient building that can be unearthed or covered over (as in the Plaza de Tlatelolco, where it also represents one of three cultures) or rocked by the earthquake of 1985 and the social movements of the last two decades. The figure exemplifies Steele's methodology here as she deftly moves between history, politics, and social and textual analysis in her engaging consideration of recent developments in the Mexican novel.

Steele begins with an overview of writing from the time period under consideration (1970s and 1980s) in order to demonstrate why the authors she's chosen are representative and what they represent. Elena Poniatowska's work exemplifies the testimonial and documentary narrative, Fernando del Paso's is the "total novel," José Emilio Pacheco's is a precise, straightforward neorealism, and José Agustín's ambitious production is emblematic of "Onda narrative." While these choices of author and works are pertinent and insightful, they also concentrate our focus on well-known writers, down playing other applicable tendencies mentioned in the introduction. Because these works are "representative" here, the demarcation between different tendencies is sharpened, limiting the possibilities for overlap, for dialogue between texts. For readers already familiar with these authors, however, Steele's attention to gender in every instance illuminates new aspects of the texts and the inclusion of a variety of critical perspectives—Bakhtin, Foucault, Gramsci, Jung, Monsiváis, as well as applicable sociological data—complements Steele's own analysis. Her broader methodology of selecting representative texts is condensed in each chapter, which combines an overview of an author's work with a detailed examination of a specific text.

The first chapter, on Elena Poniatowska, offers a strong and original reading of the author's best known work, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. Steele brings the primary issues into focus by highlighting the conflictive relationship between Poniatowska and her real-life subject, Josefina Bórquez. Using the unpublished transcripts of the interviews which subtend the narrative, Steele discloses the tension indicative of the different power dynamics between these two. Access to these texts make Steele a third

reader, almost another participant in the conversation, and this section on the struggle for interpretative power is so interesting that it could be the subject of a chapter in itself. We see how the defiance that Bórquez reveals is expanded throughout the novel in Jesusa's characterization. Steele gives us a concrete analysis of the meaning of Jesusa's spiritism in Mexican society and considers how she crosses gender lines, identifying with patriarchal figures and participating in what is often qualified as "male" violence. Her ability to manipulate gender roles works as a survival mechanism and, in fact, makes her more androgynous; she is a protagonist who is able to represent both "masculine" and "feminine" subaltern roles in Mexico.

A gendered concept of violence is also notable in Fernando del Paso's "total" novel, *Palinuro de México*, in which the ultimate test of manhood is wartime execution. Steele proposes that del Paso's narrative is an example of "male storytelling" because it "hinges on traditional concepts of male camaraderie and imagination" (80). Her argument is convincing in terms of the narration and characterization in this novel but she could have drawn more attention to the links between gender and some of the boundary-breaking formal aspects she observes in *Palinuro*. While the aspiration to write a "total" novel might be seen as masculinist (Steele draws an apt comparison to Joyce, but also comments on Poniatowska's works' comparable breadth), del Paso's formal innovations break with the conventional novel. The penultimate chapter is written in a "commedia del'arte" style which, Steele explains, produces a kind of Brechtian distancing; taking the critic's observations a step further, I wondered if the farcical, parodic elements observed here couldn't be extended to the author's entire attempt at "totalization." In this case, del Paso could be seen as making a meta-critical commentary on an intentionally gendered authorial egoism and the limits of fiction.

Gender, politics, and nationalism are the interdependent ingredients of *Las batallas en el desierto* by José Emilio Pacheco. Positioning this novella in terms of the *Bildungsroman* and Bakhtinian novel of emergence, Steele establishes Pacheco's protagonist, Carlitos, as an emblem of Mexican society of the late 1940s. While Carlos is the most fully developed, all of the characters are, to some extent, figures in a national allegory. For this reason, I found Mariana's lack of subjectivity (which Steele accurately identifies) in keeping with her role as first love; a distanced figure, she is comparable to the Rita Hayworth look-alike on the cover in Carlitos' eyes, and even to the adult narrator Carlos, who sees her only in terms of the past, through his nostalgia for his own, lost innocence. Steele gets a lot out of this compact text, scrutinizing the social and cultural changes and the commodification of Mexico and situating these traits as precursors to the escalating economic crisis of the 1980s.

The writers of "La Onda" manifested the contradictions between the U.S.-influenced modernization so apparent in Pacheco's novella and



Mexico's rudimentary actuality. In *Cerca del fuego*, Steele finds that José Agustín creates an apocalyptic, 1980s rendering of the earlier cultural crisis. He also generates a "texticular narrative" that obsessively describes the male body, positioning it as the center of literary creation and spiritual transcendence. Women are excluded or marginalized in Agustín's construction of another national allegory in which the concept of *patria* ultimately reinforces the patriarchal family. Steele does not see irony or self-consciousness in his narrative and her analysis of Agustín emphasizes the point that La Onda's radical gestures culminate in a culturally conservative vision of Mexico.

Combatting this pessimism, Steele ends her study with a chapter entitled "Out of the Rubble." Here she describes the emergence of new social actors, cultural decentralization, New Feminism, and popular movements. It is interesting (and not accidental) that we begin to leave the novel here as Steele discusses a mélange of film, theatre, photography, and cultural criticism. The emergence of these hybrid, non-canonical genres raises questions about the novel's function and its historical association with colonialism, implying that perhaps to really get "beyond the pyramid" we must shatter canonical forms. Is this a preview of coming attractions? I hope so and look forward to Cynthia Steele's next intelligent consideration of cultural events in Mexico.

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Barbara J. Webb. *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction: Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris and Edouard Glissant*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992. Pp. 185.

The critical study of literature can be approached from many different angles and points of view. The last twenty years of scholarship have generated a number of critical frameworks from which to read literary discourses, interpret them, and ultimately corroborate or contradict the original hypotheses. Regardless of the power and importance of disciplines like structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalytical criticism, Marxist criticism, or feminism, myth criticism is still a very powerful and elucidating approach, capable of uncovering the fundamental themes and motives of an aesthetic artifact, able to relate a particular work to a number of different texts in different media and disciplines, and versatile enough to be able to profit from the insights lent by the theoretical advantages of other approaches. The recent book by Barbara J. Webb comes to prove the currency of myth criticism in the postmodern age, and demonstrates that myth criticism is able to show patterns and similarities that Marxist criti-



cism would overlook while searching for the socio-economic conditions responsible for that particular discourse.

As its title indicates, the cornerstone of Professor Webb's book is the old binomial equation of myth and history. Her point of departure is that "myth and history are not mutually exclusive modes of literary expression—myth relegated to the real of a historical transcendence and history to the prison of documentary realism" (3), but rather that "folk or mythic imagination is the key to artistic vision and historical understanding," a point already held by Giambattista Vico in his *Scienza Nuova* in the middle of the eighteenth century (4). Using this concept of myth and history as a point of departure, Professor Webb establishes as a working hypothesis that "The novels of Carpentier, Harris and Glissant assume the role of myth as historical memory and speculative inquiry intended to provoke consciousness" (6).

Such a premise and the universal nature of the mythic discourse allow Barbara J. Webb to conduct a revealing study that goes beyond borders and linguistic frontiers, rendering a transcultural analysis, fascinating in its implications and important in its conclusions. Chapter One is devoted to the study of Carpentier's concept of "lo real maravilloso" and Jacques Stéphen Alexis' "le réalisme merveilleux," where "mestizaje" is one of the most important characteristics, and baroque and orality the legitimate style of the new world. Chapter Two focuses on the relationship between folk imagination and history, where she considers that "the folk imagination . . . is the vehicle for author's experiments with space and time in narrative" (28). She works this idea out in the context of Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo*, Harris' *The Secret Ladder*, and Glissant's *Le quatrième siècle*. Her point, and I agree with her, is that through their characters' points of view, these authors "challenge conventional notions of history and the fictional representation" (27).

The third chapter takes the myth of El Dorado and traces its presence in Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* and Harris' *Palace of the Peacock*. This approach reveals the similarities both novels have in common and the pervasive presence of mythical constructs, despite the characters' beliefs and values. As Professor Webb claims: "By reenacting the quest for El Dorado, the protagonists of the two novels are able to lay claim to their personal and collective past, giving new meaning to their present" (63). In Chapter Four she takes an opposite perspective, reading history as a mythic discourse. Her emphasis here is placed on the image of the spiral, as a metaphor of the relationship between myth and history. Her chosen texts for this discussion are Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces*, Harris' *Tumatumari*, and Glissant's *La case du commandeur*. These novels have in common a descent into the temporal vortex of history and a female protagonist whose role is to question such a concept as insufficient, and to propose a combination of the mythic and the historic imagination.

The final chapter is devoted to the study of the poetic identity and difference within the context of Carpentier's *Concierto barroco* and Harris' *Black Marsden*. Her claim is that their aim is "to overthrow all notions of cultural domination in order to achieve an open-ended vision of fiction and reality" (129). Cross-cultural landscapes, displacements, degradation, and misrepresentation of cultures are some of the elements these novels present, thus exploring the highly complex world of cultural identities and differences.

One major drawback of this book, which can be partly attributed to the methodology employed, is an excessive emphasis on plot summary. In order to explain her mythical interpretation of the novels, the author summarizes many passages, making the reading somewhat simplistic and boring. Another weakness is that the dichotomy Webb uses in the framework of her study is not sufficiently problematized, ignoring most of the positions that see myth and history as totally contradictory, incompatible, and distorting.

Apart from these problems I find this book to be extremely enlightening and interesting. It demonstrates the power of myth criticism and its epistemological capabilities, and Professor Webb's ability to reunite the diverse and see beyond mere appearances.

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